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ABSTRACT

This paper presents data and discussions based on two Australian studies of the possible educational problems suffered by children from one-parent homes. The first section describes anticipated problem areas for these children, i.e., financial burden, health problems, change in life style, and the emotional effects of disruption. Data from other countries are reviewed and demographic tables for Australia are given. The second section presents teachers' responses from the two studies, including illustrative quotes, concerning the one-parent child's educational performance, aspirations and emotional stability. The paper notes that while most teachers viewed one-parent children as the same as two-parent children in these areas, a significant minority saw them as worse. The third section describes more fully the differences that teachers perceived between these groups of children. The fourth section reports data on the one-parent family and single-parent views on such issues as child-school relationship, parent-child relationship, and labeling. The concluding section reports ongoing concerns highlighted by the two studies. A bibliography is included. (WAS)

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WORKING PAPER

One-parent families
and educational disadvantage
by Don Edgar and
Freya Headlam

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Abbreviations

CPPS — Catholic Parish Primary Schools study
SPI — Schools Priority Index survey

An article in the New York Times puts the problem of the research on one-parent families and educational disadvantage quite succinctly:

'Almost half of the nation's children will spend at least part of their early years in one-parent homes . . . Yet most schools are still structured around traditional styles of family living. They haven't budged from bankers' hours that pose problems for working single parents. Textbooks still depict mom-and-dad families. Teachers and administrators assume both parents are around or whisper that Johnny's misbehavior is to be expected because, after all, his mother is "a divorcee".'

(New York Times 7 January 1979)

Although in Australia the figures are not quite as high as that, the schools are only just beginning to awaken to the fact that a growing number of their students — those from one-parent families — have curricular, scheduling and counselling needs that differ from those of children from two-parent families.

This paper is based on findings from a pilot study of the possible educational problems suffered by children from Victoria's one-parent homes. Questionnaires were piloted on a group of 15 teachers and 27 parents in order to refine the hypotheses and methodology prior to conducting a fully-fledged survey using a stratified random sample. The findings are of interest not only in themselves, but also because of the lessons learned about appropriate methodologies for this kind of very sensitive study. The Education Department of Victoria kindly gave permission to conduct the study through its schools and the authors wish to acknowledge the Department's assistance and the cooperation of the schools involved.

The study arose from other research on schools' disadvantage. It became clear that children from one-parent homes were clustered in particular areas and schools. Housing Commission policies and access to other cheap housing seemed to be one explanation, but the schools themselves with high percentage of one-parent children appeared both not to be aware the figures were so high and not to be developing any programs or policies that could have clarified the problems such children might face with their schooling.

In reporting our results we also record evidence of the scholastic attainments of children from single-parent families from a more structured and less sensitive study carried out in Catholic Parish Primary Schools¹ (the CPPS study) in the western suburbs of Melbourne. This study was conducted quite independently but offers some useful supporting evidence.

Though we were reluctant to pre-define the issue as 'a problem', previous research suggests that children from one-parent homes do face clear difficulties. The major one is obviously financial. In Henderson's (1975) poverty survey, one in every three lone-parent families was below the poverty line, 45 per cent were at or near the poverty line and lone-mother families were found to have the lowest incomes.

By 1979 Henderson found lone parents on benefits were much further below the poverty line (getting only three-quarters of a 'survival level' income) than unemployed couples and age pensioners, (*Age*, 3 March 1979:3). Even Treasurer Howard expressed concern about the 'tax disadvantages suffered by single income families' (*Age*, 8 May 1979). Though no recent research has been conducted which is comparable to that of the Poverty Inquiry, it is possible to estimate the current situation. If we apply the Inquiry's broad findings to what we know of families in Australia today (a conservative estimate because the economic recession of the mid-1970s could be expected to exacerbate the incidence of poverty) we find that approximately 670 000 dependent children are now living in families either below or within 20 per cent of the poverty line. This figure exceeds the present population of Tasmania. Of lone-parent families over 45 per cent will be either very poor or within 20 per cent of the poverty line.

Lone-parent families also seem to suffer more health problems than two-parent families (English et al, 1978: 43-53; Ferri, 1976, Ch. 15). Lone mothers' housing is more likely to be rented and to be a flat than two-parent housing; more crowded and shared with others; less well-equipped with telephones, fridges, clothes driers or other household appliances. (English et al, 1978: 31-73, Hunt, 1966). Lone mothers and fathers work longer hours, without the home support of a spouse, and often find even part-time work does not coincide with school hours (English et al, 1978: 57-8; Ferri, 1976: Ch. 8).

¹The CPPS study compared 72 children from single-parent families with 72 children from 'intact' families. Principals of 17 Catholic Primary Schools in the western suburbs identified all the sixth and seventh grade children from single-parent families in their school. Each of these children was matched with another child — the matching criteria were: age, sex, grade level, ethnicity, and the general socio-economic level of the home as indicated by parental occupation. The occupations were nearly all manual or routine clerical. In some cases the matching was not exact on all criteria.

The study was carried out by Graham Downes, Janet Hase and Jenny Cant as part of their B.Ed. studies at La Trobe University. Derek Toomey supervised the work.

Table 1: Children Affected by Divorce

Year	Number of Children under 18 Affected by Divorce	Number of Dissolutions	Average Number of Children under 18 (All Dissolutions)	% Dissolutions with no Children under 18	Average Number of Children under 18 (Dissolutions with Children)
1973	23,078	16 196	1.4	32.4	2.1
1974	25 505	17 638	1.4	31.7	2.1
1975	34 922	24 257	1.4	32.7	2.1
1976	73 645	63 230	1.2	37.3	1.9
1977	57 878	45 150	1.3	36.3	2.0
1978	51 599	40 608	1.3	36.9	2.0
1979	46 130	37 854	1.2	38.7	2.0
1980	45 836	39 258	1.2	39.4	2.0
1981	43 616	41 412	1.2	38.9	2.0

Since 1976: 325 704 children affected by divorce, i.e. 7.3% of all children under 18.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Divorces, Australia, 1978, 1979, 1980 and 1981.*

Note: This table does not include children of separated families who may or may not have used magistrates courts for matters of maintenance, access and custody, injunctions and some property matters.

While the research evidence on the impact of marital disruption on children yields conflicting results (Goode, 1956; Burchinal, 1964; Bernard, 1971; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Hetherington, 1979), such economic circumstances and living arrangements inevitably cause strain. The marked reduction in income for divorced and separated women (Brandwein et al, 1974; Hoffman, 1977) means a changed life-style, often status loss and a move to a poorer neighbourhood. Long-term consequences for children include some evidence of lower educational and socio-economic attainment (Hauser and Featherman, 1976; Duncan et al, 1972: 63-66) and higher marital instability once they themselves marry (Bumpass and Sweet, 1972).

Disruption is often, of course, worse before separation than after it occurs. Krupinski (1970: 22-25) reported 14 per cent of husbands of deserted wives had been alcoholics, 41 per cent heavy drinkers; over half had had a criminal record; conflict over sex had occurred in 70 per cent of marriages; and over 60 per cent of husbands had physically attacked their wives. Gambling, unstable work histories and a totally unreliable family income had also been common. Marsden (1969) reports for the United Kingdom that, while for lone mothers poverty and fatherlessness, financial and social deprivation fused together, for some (one-third) the regularity of even low benefit payments was a definite improvement. He also reports the stigma attached to poverty, the sacrifice of struggling lone mothers, and the embarrassment of children at school faced with free meal tickets, poor clothing and excursion costs.

Thus there is every reason to expect that children from one-parent families experience a qualitatively different life-style from many of their fellows and that schools should be aware of how that life-style affects school work.

Australian Census data indicate that during the 1970s there was a dramatic increase in the number of one-parent families (a 57 per cent increase between 1971 and 1976) but a decline in the growth rate of the 'traditional' family of head, spouse and children. One-parent families now account for 12 per cent of all Australian families with children, while 'traditional' intact families account for only 39 per cent of all families, a drop of 2 per cent since 1966. United States data show a similar picture: families of husband, wife and their biological children make up only 45 per cent of all families; the number of divorced women heading families had tripled between 1960 and 1975; and the number of children in one-parent families has increased by 60 per cent in the last decade (Schorr and Moen, 1979: 15).

'By the age of eighteen', Schorr and Moen predict, 'nearly one out of two children will have lived a period of time with a single parent' (1979: 15). The fact that separation and divorce are often only temporary states leading to re-marriage means that the Australian figure (of 12 per cent of all families with children having only one parent) is misleading. Caldwell (1980: 32) predicts that 'if one-quarter of Australian marriages end in divorce, then we may be reaching a position where around one-third of children are not living with their two biological parents — two-thirds due to separation and one-third due to death'.

Table 2: Family Types in Australia

Family Type	1969 ¹		1974 ^{2,3}		1979 ⁴		1980 ⁵		1981 ⁶	
	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%	('000)	%
All families	3 176	100.0	3 470	100.0	3 779	100.0	3 838	100.0	3 878	100.0
Married couple families ⁷	2 867	90.2	3 099	89.3	3 302	87.4	3 348	87.2	3 390	87.2
With dependent children	1 702		1 805		1 844		1 856		1 860	
No dependent children	1 164		1 293		1 457		1 492		1 529	
One-parent families	131	4.1	183	5.3	270	7.1	270	7.0	282	7.3
with dependent children										
Male head	23		24		45		40		45	
Female head	108		159		225		230		237	
Other families with	179	5.6	188	5.4	207	5.5	222	5.8	216	5.5
no dependent children										
Male head	52		58		58		55		53	
Female head	127		131		150		167		163	
All families with dependent children	1 832	100.0	1 989	100.0	2 114	100.0	2 125	100.0	2 143	100.0
Married-couple families with dependent children ⁷	1 702	92.9	1 805	90.8	1 844	87.2	1 856	87.3	1 860	86.8
One-parent families with dependent children	130	7.1	183	9.2	270	12.7	269	12.6	282	13.2
Australian population aged 15 and over					10 501	100.0	10 715	100.0	10 909	100.0
Individuals not family members	na		na		1 460	13.9	1 549	14.5	1 656	15.2
Family members as percentage of total population	na		na			86.1		85.5		84.8

¹ ABS *Income Distribution* 1968/69² ABS *Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families* Nov. 1974³ ABS *Income Distribution* 1973/74 part 2 and part 3⁴ ABS *Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families* July 1979⁵ ABS *Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families* July 1980⁶ ABS *Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families* July 1981⁷ Includes legal and de facto marriages.

na = not available

But the picture is even more complex than that, because divorce and separation... affect various groups in society differentially. For example in the USA, being born black means that three out of every five black children will experience marital disruption before age 16. For white children, one out of six will experience disruption before age 5 and one out of three before age 16 (Bumpass and Rindfuss, 1978: 9). Within that racial difference, mothers' education levels affect marital disruption. Of the children of poorly educated white women, 33 per cent experience a disrupted family by age 15, whereas that happens to only 20 per cent of the children of mothers who completed high school (Bumpass and Rindfuss,

1978: 15). Disruption occurs earlier for blacks and the less well-educated, and for mothers under the age of 20 (twice as likely as for mothers aged 25 and over). Though younger women tend to have a higher re-marriage rate, black women re-marry less frequently, so their children spend longer in the one-parent state; four out of five under 18 remain without their mother re-marrying for at least 5 years (Bumpass and Rindfuss, 1978: 18). Catholic mothers remain in the unmarried state longer than non-Catholic mothers (5 cf. 3 years), and the better educated women enjoy a shorter period of disruption than the poorly educated (Bumpass and Rindfuss, 1978: 20).

As Bumpass and Rindfuss (1978: 23) suggest, 'family life' for many children

'departs markedly from a simple model of socialisation in a "family of orientation"'. Glick and Norton (1977) noted that only 80 per cent of the children in the United States were living with both their natural parents in 1976. Our estimates indicate that over one-third of all children spend a portion of their childhood when their mothers are between marriages. Most of these will eventually be part of a second marriage. However, the average time spent "between marriages" before 18 is four and a half years, and for a substantial minority the experience lasts much longer'.

In other words, 'transition *between* families of orientation is likely soon to become nearly as common as continuous socialisation in a single family' (Bumpass and Rindfuss, 1978: 2).

We do not have exactly comparable figures for Australia. But we know that migrant parents are less likely to be in one-parent families than Australian-born, that religious differences are less than we might have expected, that 70 per cent of all lone parents left school before they were 16 (cf. 65 per cent of mothers and 57 per cent of fathers in two-parent families), and that more male lone parents are in transport and trades occupations than in professional and administrative occupations (English et al, 1978).

So children from different social groups are differentially open to experience in a one-parent family in Australia. Because separation and divorce take place more often after children have reached school age, seven out of every ten children in female one-parent families are in primary or secondary school. By contrast, six out of ten from male one-parent families are at secondary school or have left school. For intact two-parent families, seven out of ten children are either not yet at school or are only in primary school (English et al, 1978: 23).

Some idea of the magnitude of the potential problem for schools can be seen in Table 3 which gives figures for Victorian schools based on the 1977 Schools Priority Index survey.

It must be stressed that these figures are based on school records that seem often to be out of date and inaccurate, but the general picture is, we believe, of the right magnitude. To find individual schools where 34 per cent of 836 enrolled, or 19 per cent of 299 enrolled, or 18 per cent of 31 enrolled come from one-parent families is to locate a 'group' that, in sheer size, if not in identity and social organisation, must present teachers with a serious challenge to their sensitivity and personal ingenuity. Just how aware are teachers that their schools contain such a challenge?

Teachers' Responses

Because we had each school's official percentage for one-parent children, we asked teachers for their estimates of the school's percentage. The primary school teachers correctly said 'under 10 per cent' as the official figure for 1977 was 8.4 per cent. But for the high school used in the pilot study, the official figure was 29 per cent and only four teachers said 'between 20-29 per cent'. Another six said '10-19 per cent' and one said 'under 10 per cent'.

One young male teacher's responses are worth looking at in some detail because they reveal the difficulty of generalising from survey results, either about lone-parent children or about their teachers. He thinks of lone-parent children as 'one group' rather than as 'several different groups' such as children of widows, separated, divorced or unmarried parents. He sees their behavior in class and their emotional stability as worse, their 'special problems' stemming from the lack of a 'balanced male-female parental relationship' that leads them to seek help 'from a person they substitute as a parent'. He speaks of their 'lower explosion point', taking 'discipline and advice with resentment'.

'a lack of confidence because of a feeling of inadequacy or not the full sixpence. They must have something wrong with them because of their inadequate parental situation. I can't be as good as them because they've got two parents. Hence feelings, thoughts, self-assessment, discipline, etc. are influenced by this type of guilt complex'.

On the other hand, this particular teacher is not without sensitivity. He says lone-parent children 'appear to shelter with each other, confide in each other's problems. Respect each other more. Understand each other better'. Other children at the school, in contrast, tease them a lot because of money problems, sexual aspects ('You wouldn't know, your father couldn't tell you!'), and because identification with the lone-mother makes them therefore 'sissy'. He responds to student problems 'with help as much as possible' by trying 'to provide the missing parent figure'. Compared to other parents, lone parents appear to visit the school more often, are more interested and concerned about the child's progress, have higher aspirations for them and help them more with their studies. The lone parents' most serious problems he sees as being the child's emotional disturbance, economic difficulties, the parents' lack of time and energy to give to the child and the stigma suffered in social relationships.

Thus, despite his inaccurate perception of how many one-parent children there are in his school, this teacher is open to helping. He, like most of the teachers, rejects the notion that

Table 3: Victorian School Numbers of One-Parent Children (1977)

Victorian School Region	No. of Schools with 15% or more children from one-parent families	Highest School one-parent %	Regional Average one-parent %	Total Enrolled	Estimated Total one-parent children in schools
A. METROPOLITAN					
Sunshine	7 schools	19%	6%	62 547	3 752
Preston	17 schools	30	8	90 830	7 266
Prahran	41 schools	39	16	45 961	7 353
Knox	8 schools	27	6	104 433	6 265
Frankston	27 schools	24	9	99 309	8 937
Metropolitan Total					33 573
B. RURAL					
Gippsland	18 schools	53	6	35 203	2 112
Benafla	11 schools	30	7	34 512	2 415
Bendigo	9 schools	62	7	33 991	2 379
Geelong	20 schools	44	6	49 711	2 982
Ballarat	19 schools	50	8	21 522	1 721
Rural Total:					11 609
Estimated Victorian Total:					45 182

trained counsellors or psychologists would be able to give better help than teachers, feeling 'these parents resent, withdraw from "lettered" people'. Teachers are on the spot when needed, though 'these children need a hell of a lot more help than we are able to give'.

In contrast, another young male teacher correctly said the school had between 20-29 per cent single-parent children. He too thinks of them as one group only, but stresses the fact that they are 'individuals in different individual circumstances'. He refused to answer questions comparing one-parent with two-parent children, saying

'There are two-parent family situations which are hostile and therefore of greater danger to the child than a one-parent warm, loving situation. Similarly there are two-parent situations where the financial circumstances cause more emotional and social damage to the child. The complete social situation is of more relevance in a study such as this rather than the single-parent situation. The parental arrangement is but one variable in the child's environment — the myriad of variables impinging on the child including his own psychological state are of equal importance in determining emotional and social behaviour. The teacher is *not* adequately trained to cope with the situation he/she faces'.

He does not see lone parents as visiting school or helping the child any more than those from two-parent families, feels they are 'less secure, always smokers, yet realistic in that they are all too aware of the financial restraints on themselves and their families. They possibly do not fully appreciate the

strains on children'. He sees some prejudice existing against one-parent children but less than that against 'migrants, Ab-origines and poor people'.

Thus, within the one school we find teachers who differ markedly in their perception of one-parent family and school problems. Yet even the one who is less aware of the facts shows an awareness that such children need individual assistance. Teachers emerge in general as sensitive to the difficulties faced by one-parent families. Such parents report an agreeable amount of help and sensitivity on the part of teachers too. Yet there are some areas that still give cause for concern.

We can report the overall findings for teachers fairly simply.

Most teachers say one-parent children are the 'same' as two-parent children. However a significant minority checked 'lower' or 'worse' in relation to one-parent children's educational performance, aspirations, and emotional stability. Ferri's (1974) study in the UK did find appreciable difference in reading and arithmetic achievement, but poverty seemed to be the crucial factor rather than family status. 'After an initial period of disruption, the children had settled down again and were now progressing satisfactorily' (Ferri & Robinson, 1976: 51-2).

This question was a major focus of the CPPS study. The study compared sixth and seventh grade children from one-parent families with children from 'intact' families, matched for sex,

Table 4: Mean Differences between One-Parent Groups and 'Intact' Groups on Standardised Tests of Performance (CPPS Study)

Test		One-Parent Group	'Intact' Group	P < *
ACER				
Mathematics	whole numbers	36.7	37.6	.0524
AM4	computation	50.3	58.3	.0413
ACER				
Progressive				
Achievement	comprehension	25.0	31.6	.0696
Tests	vocabulary	29.7	37.5	.0585
Scit-Appraisal	global			
Test	self-esteem	62.0	66.1	.1283

* Based on t tests for group differences.

ethnicity, age, grade level and the socio-economic level of the father's occupation.

Table 4 sets out the results. Although the two groups of children were matched for the socio-economic level of the fathers' occupations, they were not matched for income differences, which, we know, are likely to be important for the two types of family at each socio-economic level. The study cannot throw any light on the causes of these differences in test performance.

The CPPS study also asked the teachers to rate the students' mathematical ability and understanding and their comprehension, reading and language abilities. The 'intact' children scored higher on standardised tests of English and mathematical knowledge. Teachers' ratings show rather more marked differences in favour of the 'intact' group than in the case of the test scores. This is somewhat surprising since the teachers were making comparisons between children within schools, in which children tend to have a restricted range of abilities, whereas the tests are designed to be valid across schools and would normally be expected to be more responsive to home background influences. The tests have a higher level of statistical reliability than the teachers' ratings which would make the tests more discriminating. It could then be that some teachers are inclined to under-rate the one-parent children's attainments because of an expectation effect — given that, as reported above, a number of teachers are inclined to remark on the lower scholastic attainments of such students. This suspicion is supported by the fact that when the teachers' ratings were moderated to reflect differences between the academic standards of the schools (as perceived by the teachers), differences between the 'intact' and one-parent children were found to be reduced. This is

Table 5: Mean Differences between One-Parent Groups and 'Intact' Groups on Teachers' Ratings of Students' Scholastic Performance and Self-esteem (low scores indicate higher performance — on a five point scale).

Teachers' Rating on:	One-Parent Group	'Intact' Group	P < *
Mathematical ability	3.1	2.6	.008
Mathematical understanding	3.1	2.5	.0012
Reading and language ability	3.1	2.5	.0009
English comprehension	2.8	2.3	.0004
Self-esteem	3.1	2.5	.00001

* Based on t tests for group differences.

not to say that real differences in the average learning rates between the two groups do not occur, but some teachers may be inclined to over-state them and, perhaps, award marks on this basis. More research is needed to test out this idea, but it is given additional support by further evidence indicated below.

These differences in scholastic attainment also appear to be sometimes accompanied by differences in educational expectations. English (1978: 24-25) found lone parents, especially mothers, have lower aspirations for their children and Ferri's study (1974) suggests boys from such families plan to leave school for work early to help with family finance. Given current high levels of youth unemployment this situation is no doubt even more of a problem.

Evidence on emotional instability remains inconclusive (Ferri, 1974: Ch. 13; Bishop, 1977; Bradbury, 1978). Reports by parents on behaviour at home, in our pilot data, revealed only slight differences by family situation. But the teachers in the pilot study consistently reported emotional instability as the one factor on which one-parent children differ most from two-parent children. This, plus absenteeism from school and the lack of parental time and attention at home, they see as reasons why the performance of one-parent children is lower, though most teachers see no differences in ability. They feel one-parent children miss the opposite sex parent and teachers allow themselves to be used as a substitute figure. Of these teachers, 50 per cent say one-parent children need more help from them and seek more attention. Such children, are, they say, ambivalent, feeling more independent, often defiant of authority, yet in fact being more dependent on staff and their peers than other children of the same age. Withdrawal into solitude and fantasy often contrasts with higher volatility, a lower 'explosion point' than others. Low self-esteem is associated with less self-control and teachers seem to 'gently' try to discourage their irritability, swearing and 'acting up'.

On the question of self-esteem, the CPPS study has some relevant results. The students completed a standardised test of self-esteem, a 36 item self-report inventory which produces scores for self-esteem in relation to families, peers and scholastic ability, as well as a global self-esteem score. On none of these scores were there significant differences between the one-parent and the 'intact' children. However, teachers were inclined to rate rather lower the self-esteem of the one-parent children.

Further, during the course of each interview the teachers were asked to comment on their reasons for giving the various ratings they had made of the children. Two classifications of teachers' responses were made; first, whether or not the teachers voluntarily referred to the single-parent status of the child (this aspect of the investigation having been concealed from them), and second, whether the home was mentioned as having a negative influence in some way as against no influence being mentioned or a positive influence.

On all the various ratings made by the teachers, those children mentioned as from one-parent families received lower average ratings and these were more likely to be explained as the result of negative home influences; those children mentioned as suffering adverse home conditions were also more likely to receive lower ratings. There appears little doubt that there is some tendency for teachers to perceive children from one-parent families as labouring under handicaps.

However, the results of our pilot study suggest that they do not see one-parent children as posing a challenge to them as 'teachers' so much but as a 'person'. Four teachers said the only problem was lack of acceptance of their authority. Their treatment is firmness in class and by spending more time with them after class, listening and explaining. In almost every case, teachers respond in a caring manner.

'Louisa cries each Monday after Dad has been for the weekend. I cuddle her, give her coffee and keep telling her that the Court Order keeping Dad away should be through soon'.

'Susan ran away and wrote a note telling me. I contacted her parents, found her, and sat through the court case'.

'I try to be understanding and show affection towards the child, make the child feel wanted'.

'We need more time for teachers to be able to give the children what they miss out on at home: stories read, reading heard, playing games, etc.'

'Many children can't afford excursion money. I pay for them myself, or use school money'.

'One child cries if I raise my voice. I try to help the child see that I'm not an unreasonable person and that all teachers are not shits'.

Even allowing for the fact that teachers may be putting their best face forward in answering such questions, their re-

sponses seem very encouraging. Overwhelmingly they see a listening, counselling role as part of a teacher's job. While teachers may wish to take and may benefit from appropriate training, most felt that those without psychological or human relations experience should also be able to perform a counselling role. Only two felt trained outsiders such as psychologists or counsellors would be better able to help than teachers. Most felt trained outsiders come and go, and are neither there when a problem comes up nor there to follow it up.

Teachers' major fear was their lack of time to help even when help was clearly needed. Only one mentioned wanting more legal knowledge about court orders, divorce, and youth training centres. That such information should be available to every teacher and school principal is clear, however, from examples given of trouble at school with 'the other parent'.

'No information is given at the school unless the custody settlement is well known'.

'Generally when this happens you take the parent to the principal who rings up the parent who has custody rights'.

'As soon as we knew he was the other parent we told him he couldn't take the child, but if the child wanted to talk to him, then the child could'.

'Not the other parent, but another relative who, as we found out later, was not supposed to pick up the child. Staff were very disturbed. No harm came from this case, but we could see the implications'.

Perceived Differences

When asked were all one-parent children the same, or could they distinguish different 'groups', two-fifths of the teachers said one-parent children formed one group with similar problems. The other three-fifths distinguished between widowed and separated or divorced children, between recent and long-standing separations, and between those with parents on social services versus those working.

They rank one-parent children as being different from others, first in terms of emotional disturbance, then on parental limits and attitudes, and last on economic factors. While this may simply reflect the low socio-economic area in which our pilot schools were located, it is worrying that teachers are not more aware of the serious poverty of one-parent families. Nor does it square with Ferri's findings on the significance of poverty as the major distinguishing factor on a wide variety of educational and social variables.

When asked what problems lone parents face in regard to the children's well-being and progress at school, teachers mention lack of money, home amenities, security, time and

energy frequently, but they still rank emotional disturbance at the top. Parents themselves do not see anywhere near as much emotional disturbance in their children as the teachers do, listing economic difficulty and time shortage as their worst problems.

Teachers offer a very positive picture of the lone parents themselves. There is very little evidence in our pilot study of teachers holding stereotyped attitudes about 'divorcees' or deserted wives 'deserving it'. Though they recognise lone parents are at times less secure, more nervous and embarrassed about their family situation, teachers report lone parents as being more concerned about their children's progress, perhaps because they fear the family situation may have adverse effects. They visit the school more often, come to talk with the teacher as often, help and encourage the child more and have the same or higher aspirations for their children as other parents. Teachers clearly feel lone parents respond positively to their openness, are independent enough not to unburden all their woes but enjoy having someone adult to talk to, and mostly encourage evening appointments to suit the parents' work schedules. Teachers report little or no prejudice against lone parents in the community and even less within the school, an indication perhaps of the greater social acceptability today of marital separation.

Lone-Parent Views

How, then, do the lone parents themselves see their situation and that of their children at school?

Of the 27 lone parents in the pilot study, 14 had been divorced or legally separated before 1976. Six were widowed, six more recently deserted or separated and one was a single mother. Ten worked full time (including all four lone fathers), 13 were at home and 3 worked part-time. Of these parents, 17 were on a pension or benefit and 14 received an income of less than \$125 per week, but only 10 claimed they were financially worse off than before. Eleven said they are better off now, perhaps reflecting the improved regularity of income that characterises many formerly unstable two-parent families (Marsden, 1969; Krupinski, 1970). Nonetheless, 18 of the 27 said that managing financially was difficult and only 3 reported 'no problems'. All but one family lived on their own, in a house rather than a flat though still 'crowded', but over half had had to move, six of them more than once since becoming a lone parent. Most had not been on an outing within the previous fortnight, would like to go out more but lacked the money, time and transport or had child care problems. Contrary to expectations, the majority still see

a lot of their previous friends and only a few felt relations with married couples had changed, usually because of a wife's possessiveness of her husband. Neighbours are generally accepting and friendly, though 8 women report neighbours 'watching like a cat', 'prying' or 'talking behind my back'. Over half these lone parents feel community prejudice does exist, both against them and their children, though at times their responses reflect more their own guilt at a 'broken marriage' than any overt act by someone else.

Our positive findings about teacher attitudes are reinforced by these lone parents. They feel their children are treated without prejudice at school, they are not singled out, teachers are 'very understanding' and react well when parents visit the school. In all but one case they indicated that the Principal, or at least one teacher, knew about their lone-parent status and, despite some defensiveness, said this did not bother them.

What emerges, however, is that lone parents often know very little about what happens to their children at school, or how they are behaving. Unlike our teachers who report a good deal of emotional instability, lone parents overwhelmingly say their children are happier now than before the marital break. They say their children have 'taken it well', 'came out of self — more outgoing', 'no change — a bit cynical', are 'no longer highly-strung or nervous'. A few say they 'can't cope emotionally', or are 'very quiet — getting better'; but most parents are not worried or feel the problems will pass in time.

Nevertheless, nearly half reported that they have trouble disciplining their children, and more than a quarter reported that their children are 'anxious, worries a lot', 'tearful, cries often', 'withdrawn, very quiet', 'sucks thumb, bites nails', 'seems timid, frightened', 'clings to parent, very dependent', 'cheeky, rude, tantrums', and 'clings to grown ups of opposite sex'. We have no standard with which to compare these findings, and two-parent children may also do such things. Ferri (1974) suggests that the children of divorced or deserted mothers are more likely to report problems than children of married mothers, single mothers or any fathers; we could put the finding round the other way and say three-quarters of these lone parents did *not* see such symptoms in their children. Research by Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) and Hetherington (1979) in the United States, however, would support the view of long-term emotional upsets in children following their parents' divorce.

Parents see few major educational disadvantages for their children. Lack of money for outings, choice of school and higher education, having no father to play with, and work preventing school visits are mentioned by a few. But when

asked more specifically was money for school extras hard to spare, the economic disadvantage of single parents becomes clearer. School camps and excursions were overwhelmingly the major problem, followed by pocket money, sports uniform, ordinary uniform, special classes (e.g. music), fees (e.g. art levies), sports equipment, books, stationery and lunches; that list covers a wide range of school activities and 21 of the 27 claimed that the school never help with money.

Despite this, the lone parents were most adamant that their children should *not* be singled out at school for special treatment, wanting them to be treated 'the same' as other children. Unlike our teachers, these parents either did not feel there was any difficulty with schoolwork that related to having only one parent, or they were not aware of the sorts of emotional problems teachers consistently reported. Their ambivalence, however, is nicely expressed by this mother of six who said

'I believe they should be treated the same — and that allowances should be made for children'.

She commented later in the questionnaire

'I hope this information will go to integrate lone parents in the community and not set up more lone parents' groups — a parent is a parent'.

She wanted

'a change in attitudes through community education and mixing more, knowing us — not secluding us, branding us as different'.

Her financial situation was especially grim, her housing so inadequate that the whole family could not sit down together for dinner. She felt there was some prejudice against single parents and 'a lot' against children. So while 'a parent is a parent', she was aware of differences and advocated a great number of government schemes to help. The point seems to be that one-parent families need and want help, but do not want thereby to be singled out as different or treated as charity cases.

Conclusions

Despite such generally positive findings, there is still cause for concern. Teachers usually do not know about a child's one-parent status until there is a problem. Troublemaking, withdrawal or academic failure become visible before most teachers decide to discover more about the home situation. Those who inaccurately report the school's percentage of lone parents as lower than the actual figure are not necessarily insensitive but rather not properly informed. Both parents and children tend to hide the facts of marital break-up as long as possible. Shyness, embarrassment, lack of time,

and feeling it is 'not the school's business', result in school records being incomplete. Often the Principal or a few teachers will know without passing on information about marital disruption. The dilemma is that of avoiding stigma and stereotyping of one-parent children within the school, whilst trying to ensure that teachers understand the possible causes of classroom behavior that may become a 'problem'. As always, overt defiance or upset raise questions, whereas quiet despair or distraction go unnoticed until the educational damage is done.

If teachers are not aware of one-parent children until they create or have problems in school, negative attitudes and expectations may follow. Those one-parent children who do *not* act up or who behave better after an unhappy marriage has broken up may never be discovered and fed into a more positive picture of one-parent children and their home situations. Unnoticed one-parent children may be better off in not being singled out, but teachers may fail to adjust to the child's altered home situation and continue to apply expectations based on a two-parent model (re money, parent at home when the child is ill, etc.)

Another difficulty is that teachers, despite their concern, have little time to deal with the needs of such children. Absenteeism is higher, often not because of illness but because errands and chores have to be done, or younger children looked after. Teachers have little time to make up for missed class work, to help with homework, to check on the home situation. Few provisions are made for supervision of children before and after school, though factories start at 7.30 a.m. and children often leave home when parents go to work. Some teachers put a case for 'shift-work' or 'flexitime' so the school could better match parental work-hours.

Existing specialist services at schools are inadequate and, in country areas, so distant that time lags between need and assistance make them useless. There is a clear need for staffing of counsellors, school social workers, careers officers, remedial teachers, to be based on a *local* assessment of school needs. A school with over 30 per cent one-parent children has to be able to adjust its program and its services to meet the time schedules, the social and educational needs of one-parent families. At present the system of staffing and timetabling is so inflexible that few such needs can be met.

Our data from this limited pilot study suggest that teachers are generally open and sympathetic in their attitudes to one-parent children and to lone parents; they do not hold negative or stereotyped views though their reports on self-esteem and their ratings of children on mathematical and reading

abilities are lower for one-parent children than their objective test scores show. Teachers do feel, however, that one-parent children are disadvantaged by the emotional upset of family change, by the lack of time (not care) available from lone parents, and by their own overstretched school time. What several teachers acknowledge, but what school records and/or information networks fail to provide, is detail about the timing and nature of marital disruption. As one teacher commented, 'The amount of time a family has been a lone-parent one is crucial in my opinion. You left *time* out entirely'. We would agree, and suggest that the strong impression of emotional disturbance is often a temporary manifestation, though one that perpetuates a stereotype. Teachers need to be made more aware of the possibly *positive* effects of separation and divorce on children, and of the significance of economic loss that usually results from becoming a one-parent family. It may be that the crucial variable is not lone-parenthood, or even emotional trauma, but rather the loss of other family resources such as money, time, security and moral support. It is a pity that the positive feelings lone parents have about teachers once their situation is discovered did not extend to a willingness on their part to inform someone in the school as soon as difficulties likely to affect the child arise or at least as soon as a total separation or death occurs.

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